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Division of the Divine: A Brief Study on Divine Objects in the Ancient Near East

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Abstract: This paper examines the concept of divinity in the Ancient Near East (ANE) by exploring the implications of a divisible divinity. The phrase "divide your divinity" is included as a request from the priests of Pirinkir to their deity, the Goddess of the Night, in a Hittite ritual translated by Gary Beckman. The unique language of the request raises several questions. Is divinity a divisible quality, and if so, what exactly is being divided? Are all ANE deities subject to a division of their divinity, or are some deities indivisible? Drawing on the research of Beckman, Natalie May, and the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (ORACC) project, this study centers on several ways divinity was conceptualized in ANE cultures. Specifically, it addresses whether ANE cultures believed that deities could divide their divinity across multiple locations, such as sanctuaries or statues, without diminishing their power. Such division is considered by evaluating the use of divine objects including images, mobile shrines, symbols and other material artifacts on three conceptual levels: material, multi-site, and characteristic division. The levels of division in the ANE gods serve to support the oneness of Yahweh because he cannot be shown to be divided along these lines. The possibility of division is contrasted with the oneness of Yahweh, as represented in the Old Testament. The use of the Ark of the Covenant throughout the history of Israel's migration, warfare, and settlement allows for a direct contrast between divine objects associated with divisible deities and those associated with a deity shown to be indivisible.

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Introduction

An important current of divinity runs beneath the material remains of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures. The destinies of city states, kingdoms, and eventual empires were not gambled in mortal combat, but believed to be decided in the realm of the divine. The interaction between divinity and humanity gives rise now, as in those ancient days, to a number of questions and speculations. This paper examines the current of divinity guiding the rituals, warfare, and building projects of the ANE, rather than produce an overview of the various pantheons and god-lists of the ANE or attempt to reconstruct one of its many religions, as so many scholars have already done. In this examination, the oneness of Yahweh's divinity is contrasted with the divisible divinity of ANE deities such as Pirinkir and Aššur, based on the material remains now available online through the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (ORACC) project. Providing such a contrast between deities and their cults examines how ANE cultures conceptualized the divine.

This paper owes much to the research of Gary Beckman, Natalie May, and the ORACC project. Beckman's translation of the dedication ritual for the Hittite "Goddess of the Night" introduced the phrase "divide your divinity" into the vernacular of this research project.[1] Beckman's translation of the request from the ritual adherents to the physical image (statue) presents the problem this paper addresses. How did people in the ANE conceptualize the divine? What is included or excluded in divinity? If a divine being divides its divinity, is something lost or lessened in the process? When a deity has divine images in multiple sanctuaries across an empire, is the divinity of that deity fragmented?

[1] Gary Beckman, "Temple Building among the Hittites," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 71– 89.

Two research questions flow from the possibility of a divided divinity. First, did the gods interact with their people in the fullness of their divinity, or did they divide themselves between locations such as fixed and mobile sanctuaries? Second, when Yahweh led Israel in war or migration, did He do so in the fullness of His divinity, or was His divinity divided between His presence in the camp and with the men of war on the march?

The proximal goal of this research article is to extend the work of Beckman by exploring possible ways in which divinity can be divided. Immediately, rituals concerned with divine objects across three contemporaneous, yet distinct, ANE cultures will be compared. Once these rituals are evaluated and the mobilization of divine objects in warfare is considered, two things will be evident: First, records of the Ark and Tabernacle in the Old Testament do not include a possible division of Yahweh's divinity. Second, divinity amongst other ANE cultures is not a static target, and extrabiblical sources record several ways in which ANE divinity can be observably divided.

Three extrabiblical sources will provide the context for an ultimate evaluation of Old Testament texts focused on the Ark of the Covenant and its role across the stages of Hebrew religious development. Two primary texts from Hittite and Assyrian sources are considered: first, the dedication of a statue for the Hittite "Goddess of the Night" and second, a court exorcist's record of cultic topography in the city of Assur. Third, this paper considers the quality of divinity itself, and since many peoples in the ANE were nomadic or at least mobile, their deities likewise moved with them. The importance of divine objects, especially images in migration and warfare, is thus a needful consideration.[2] This use of divine objects within mobile sanctuaries and structures is the focus of May's work.

[2] Images are objects, but objects are not necessarily images.

Literature Review

Within the extrabiblical sources used for this research, divinity is divided in several ways. First, division is observed at the physical level of deity, *material division*. Plainly put, every individual statue representing a singular ANE deity possesses the attributes and potency of the deity in some measure. Beckman has produced several works on Hittite rituals which center on the treatment of deities and their images within the Hittite pantheon. Beckman's translation and commentary on a ritual describing the bathing of the goddess Šawuška is illuminating here.[3] The statue is treated in a surprisingly human way: it is fed, clothed, bathed, and maintained in a manner commensurate with the service it was expected to perform for the ritual participants.[4] In another example of material division, Beckman's treatment of a ritual pertaining to the Hittite "Goddess of the Night" includes a direct appeal to the goddess to divide her divinity between two sanctuaries of the Hittites.[5] This is a formal request from the priests to the goddess manifested in the statue to transfer its divinity into another statue for use elsewhere. Beckman's translation and subsequent commentary utilizes delineating language referring to the "mother institution" and the "new temple."[6] Section thirty of the text, found in Appendix A, underscores the necessary role of the old temple and its materials in the formation of the new temple site.

[3] Gary Beckman, "Bathing the Goddess (CTH 714)," in *Marbeh Ḥokmah: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Loving Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz,* ed. Shamir Yonah, Edward L. Greenstein, Mayer I. Gruber, Peter Machinist, and Shalom M. Paul (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 43-63.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Gary Beckman, "Temple Building among the Hittites," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 71– 89.

[6] Ibid., 80.

Divine images must at some point be activated to be of any use. What transfers the divinity of a being into a material object made in the likeness of a deity? Uri Gabbay provides several instances of activation through various rituals, including cultic whispering into the ears of objects and even living creatures that were designated for the worship of a particular deity.[7] Likewise, Beckman's translation of the "Goddess of the Night" ritual details the nature of an image activation ritual in the Hittite culture, as noted above.

The ritual request for division to a new temple points to the second level of divisibility, which is highlighted in May's work and also present in the invaluable *Marbeh Hokmah* volume with Beckman, in which May evaluates the characteristics of mobile sanctuaries and divine objects on the move in times of war and migration; this level of divisibility is best summarized as *multi-site division*.[8] May highlights the importance of mobile sanctuaries and notes the importance of divine objects as functional vessels to hold the presence of the divine, ensuring their influence over the martial affairs of the nation.[9] Later sections of the paper will elaborate how May is mostly correct in this observation, but her language assumes that the Ark functions exactly the same way as the divine objects in other ANE cultures.

A third level of divisibility is observable in the cultic worship of unique attributes or aspects of the same deity, or *characteristic division*. Richard Litke's reconstructed lists of

[7] Uri Gabbay, "Ancient Mesopotamian Cultic Whispering into the Ears," in *Marbeh Ḥokmah: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Loving Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz,* ed. Shamir Yonah, Edward L. Greenstein, Mayer I. Gruber, Peter Machinist, and Shalom M. Paul (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 185-220.

[8] Natalie N. May, "Portable Sanctuaries and Their Evolution: The Biblical Tabernacle (ʿōhel môʿēd/miškān) and the Akkadian qersu," in *Marbeh Ḥokmah: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Loving Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz,* ed. Shamir Yonah, Edward L. Greenstein, Mayer I. Gruber, Peter Machinist, and Shalom M. Paul (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 369-388.

[9] Ibid., 378.

Assyro-Babylonian deities bear this out; the gods, such as Enlil, have dozens of entries referring to attributes, such as wisdom, agriculture, and masonry.[10] Another interesting characteristic is the gentilic worship of deities associated with specific shrines and sanctuaries. This is a feature implicit in the works of Litke, Beckman, and May. A deity is worshipped in relation to the city or lands it inhabits. Its particular gentilic shrine has its own image(s), supplied with the requisite sacred materials and some degree of numinosity commensurate with sacred spaces. If the secondary literature opens a crack in the doorway to discuss divinity as a divisible quality, then this paper seeks to open that door further and take a closer look at some possible ways in which ANE cultures perceived divinity can be divided.

Methodology

John H. Walton's work on ANE thought informed the research process and methodology of this paper, providing guardrails for the evaluation of the data under consideration. Walton provides ten principles for comparative study of material remains and textual evidence. Among these principles is an exhortation for scholars to look for surface similarities or conceptual differences between cultures within the data collected for historical, archaeological, literary, and linguistic evaluations.[11] According to Walton, there is no single ANE culture, and even within unique cultures, developments occur representing major shifts in language, literature, and material culture. When differences between cultures are found, the next step is to look for similarities between cultures, or vice versa.[12] In addition, the work of W. W. Hallo and

[10] Richard L. Litke, *A Reconstruction of the Assyro-Babylonian God-Lists* (New Haven, CT: Yale Babylonian Collection, 1998), 21-65.

[11] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought in the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 17-18.

[12] Before Walton gives a list of principles for evaluation, he devotes much ink to examples of evaluation that oversimplified or ignored data outright. Some early ANE studies suffered from errors that lead to an assumption

K. Lawson Younger is invaluable and informs the methods used in this paper. Younger's essay on "contextual method" concludes, like Walton's, with a list of evaluative principles and considerations for research.[13] Walton considers Hallo's approach to be the origin of methodological maturity in ANE studies for a simple reason: he not only identified similarities between the Bible and ANE sources, but their observable differences.[14]

The extrabiblical texts chosen for this analysis spotlight surface similarities between divine objects within the literary and linguistic tradition of several distinct ANE cultures. These texts provide context for meaningful observations into how divine images and other objects associated with divinity were treated broadly in the ANE. These observations are then contrasted with biblical texts pertaining to the Ark of the Covenant, the material object most closely associated with Yahweh. Within the material religious culture of the Hebrew people, the Ark of the Covenant is the only object comparable to those objects which fit within the conceptual understanding of divine images, though it is more accurately regarded as a divine object or divine symbol.

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of borrowing between the Hebrew Bible and contemporary sources in the ANE. Reactionary scholarship either ignored links between biblical and extrabiblical ANE sources or over extended findings to bring data into alignment with presuppositions based on biblical scholarship.

[13] William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), xxix-xlii.

[14] Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 5. Walton's entire discussion on appropriate methods flows from Hallo's work; the "contextual approach" does not eliminate distinctions between similar data to support a defensive or polemical point, unlike earlier miscarriages of scholarship which trended either toward reconciling sources to harmonize with biblical data or assuming that all similarities between biblical and extra-biblical sources were evidence of "borrowing." Ibid., 7-8. Hallo provides a helpful summary of his "contextual approach," highlighting the need for equal parts of comparison and contrast fixed within the geographic setting of the text. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), liii. Walton, informed by Hallo, aids this research in providing necessary planks to build a valid methodology. Hallo's considerations for evaluating source material contribute to this excellent framework for conducting research in the ANE, but also for the evaluation of current scholarship, as to whether it features a responsible methodological approach. Hallo and Younger, xli. Natalie May's assertions regarding the Ark will be borne out in a later section but are certainly an example of scholarship saying more than the evidence allows in order to make a parallel; an important consideration of Younger is to avoid this exact sort of conclusion.

In this paper, the term *divine image* narrowly refers to the man-made likeness of a given deity, such as a statue. By contrast, *divine objects* are best conceptualized as a category for the material remains associated with a particular deity. There are no sanctioned images of Yahweh, only objects. Thus, the treatment of the Ark of the Covenant, its behavior, the other material culture associated with it, its tents, its city, and ultimately, its temple are the best available points to evaluate the qualities of Yahweh's divinity against the divinity displayed in the material culture of other religions. The similarities between the Ark and other objects provide an entrance into a closer look at how greatly they differ conceptually. Deity represented by a physical object like an image is akin to the molecular structure of an element if considered in terms of scale. The physical and cosmic makeup of a particular image can be broken down further into parts, but a single divine object is essentially the smallest observable unit of a deity. Thus, observations on divine objects are foundational to this work and constitute the majority of this paper.

The order of evaluations following this section is sequential, beginning with Beckman's treatment of the Night Goddess text, from one divine image with one shrine to a divided divinity with two shrines. Then, in May's text, the research turns to examples of one or more divine objects and introduces a new aspect of divided divinity resulting from the mobilization of portable shrines during migration and warfare. In the final text, SAA 20 49, the extrabiblical analysis ends with original observations on the cultic topography of the Assyrian homeland and conclusions derived from the ORACC translation of the original text. These sources, assessed below, provide necessary context to evaluate the ritual use and activity of the Ark of the Covenant, and subsequent observations about the character of Yahweh's divinity are borne out in these evaluations. While these findings and observations are helpful, they certainly should not be extended to all ANE cultures and religions, a good and needful limitation.

Beckman: Pirinkir the Goddess of the Night

Divine objects represent the smallest observable unit of a deity. The following incantation ritual describes the transfer of potency from one object, an image of Pirinkir, to another such image; thus, it is a logical starting point for an analysis of divinity. The process of the ritual, as will be described below, is easy to understand, even if certain terms remain obscure or fragments are missing.[15] There is a pre-existent cultic shrine for Pirinkir, a Hittite deity described as the "Goddess of the Night." A new shrine in a new temple with a new image of Pirinkir are essential elements in the establishment of the new cult center. A mother image is required to create a new image, indicating a transferable quality of divinity between material objects at the level of an image. If these images are lost or destroyed, would the cult participants need to revisit the ritual which originally drew Pirinkir from the night into an image for worship? No such extant ritual was found for this research, but this ritual necessitates an original at some point in the cult of Pirinkir, and one may rightly ask where the image originated and what sort of numinous quality was imbued in the original image.

In section twenty-one an incantation is given requesting Pirinkir to "guard your person but divide your divinity."[16] This request is made of Pirinkir, but ultimately it is executed by the ritual adherents. They utilize fine oil and objects made of red wool called *tarpala* to draw the old image from its place in the mother sanctuary, and then they draw the new image into its place in

[15] It must be noted that while translations and commentary on this and other texts were read in their totality, the scope of this paper requires broad analysis which zooms in on chosen passages immediately concerned with details most relevant to the concept of divinity and the material religious culture represented in each text. Omitted references to lines of text are made in good faith, and not intended to exclude details which are perceived as contradictory to the conclusions of this research. The referenced articles are included in the bibliography at the end of the paper.

[16] Beckman, 83.

the new temple.[17] Within the ritual the use of these objects is directly associated with human participants actively drawing the deity from different temples, terrains, cities, and metaphysical locales like the underworld or the sky.[18] The numinous quality of Pirinkir is not present until the deity is drawn to the old temple and then bound to the image with a type of object called an *ulihi*.[19] These *ulihi* convey the divinity of Pirinkir from the old sanctuary and image into the new sanctuary and image. The *ulihi* are bound onto the red *kureššar* garment of the image, assuring the transfer and continual divine presence of Pirinkir.[20]

The level of influence humanity seemingly has over Pirinkir is complete. They control where the deity appears by either luring or wooing Pirinkir to the temple. The priests clothe the image with a holy garment, the *kureššar* on which the *ulihi* is bound and indeed which binds her divinity to the image. Walton observes that peoples in the ANE lacked revelation from the gods as to what they wanted or preferred during ritual activity, and thus many such rituals operate on the assumption that gods want attention paid to them like earthly kings, but to a higher degree of magnitude.[21] Walton concludes that cult followers at best could only speculate as to what might please a given deity.[22] In order to please Pirinkir, this ritual performed by the priests includes a chaotic mixture of cultic activity, such as washing, offerings, anointings, meals, and sacrifices.

The request for division of divinity stands out from the other lines of the ritual text. It implies divinity must be fragmentary in some way; in this case at least the presence of the deity

[17] Ibid., 83.

[18] Ibid., 82.

[19] Ibid., 80.

[20] Ibid., 82 and 84.

[21] Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 94.

[22] Ibid., 95.

is limited to a finite image having been drawn from several locations. At the atomic level of divinity, the image must in every way be manipulated by human hands. The only possible activity of the deity is implied in the request for Pirinkir to divide her divinity, but not her person. Yet, even her divinity is manipulated or stewarded by the priests using the *ulihi.* The division itself, though, is carried out with no recorded response from Pirinkir; surely her assent or acquiescence is preferable to the terror of a voice responding out of the night.

May: Mobile Sanctuaries

If the image itself can somehow be divided and drawn from fixed, finite locations as attested above, then what can be made of those gods whose people were nomadic or of those gods who went out to war from their temples carried in mobile shrines? At what point does the territory of one god end and another begin? Does the potency of divine beings have borders? Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate between divine objects and divine images. Walton again helps with this distinction by pointing out that in most ANE cults the image was not viewed as the deity itself but the physical presence of the deity's essence; it is the earthly image which reflects the reality of the divine.[23] Divine objects, such as shrines, weapons, and vestments, are indeed significant, but they perform a different function.

The backdrop of May's work is her study on the development of the Akkadian word, *qersu,* which denotes a portable sanctuary.[24] The term appears in several sources with a range of usage in texts from the Assyrian and Mari cultures. The *qersu* is described varyingly as the structure supporting a large tent, the tent covering itself, or the entire structure and canopy.[25] In

[23] Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 75.

[24] May, 371.

[25] Ibid., 373-375.

the Neo-Assyrian period the *qersu* is most often referenced as a portable wartime sanctuary for divine images and their accoutrements.[26] It is this most developed iteration of the term which captures the scope of meaning preferred in this research. The tent would serve the army as the cultic center away from home, while the shrines at home were simultaneously used and full of the presence of the deity who may divide its divinity between the permanent and temporary structures.

May compares the use of *qersus* and similar structures throughout her work. The most salient comparisons are made between the mobile sanctuaries of Amorites and other nomads and that of the Hebrew Tabernacle. Recalling the earlier conflation May makes between images and objects is vital at this point. In her conclusion she extends the numinous quality of divine images to those of other material objects associated with divine beings, contending that "the Ark, which was the receptacle for the divine presence, was used in military campaigns, *just as the divine symbols were in Mesopotamia."*[27] May's error is doubled when she compares the function of the Ark to the function of tents and mobile shrines *and* the images held within them.

Until this point, the views presented in this paper considered an image to be the smallest unit of divinity, and indeed the image is the physical embodiment or presence of the deity's essence. However, the Ark is nowhere described in such terms as either the container of the image of Yahweh or the physical embodiment of Yahweh's presence. The Tabernacle and Ark of Yahweh are divine objects, not images, and thus serve a different function, as the latter analysis

[26] Ibid., 376.

[27] May, 382; emphasis added.

of biblical texts will demonstrate. This misunderstanding of the function of the Ark lends insight into the error the Israelites make when they take the Ark up from Shiloh to fight the Philistines.

SAA 20 049: The Gods, Shrines, and Holy Palaces of Assur

SAA 20 049 is perhaps the most fascinating of the texts considered in this research. Quick perusals of the cultic topography in Assur leave the reader with a distinct impression: the city of Assur, indeed the city for which the empire and its citizens drew their name, must have been quite a hub of religious activity. Assur was the original capital of the Assyrian homeland.[28] The modern site in Iraq, known as Qal'at Sherqat, still bears remnants of the once great city-state, including a massive ziggurat complex dedicated to the national deity, Aššur.[29] The presence of such architecture dovetails with the accounts of Aššur's resurgence during the neo-Assyrian period, in which Sennacherib's cultic reforms rebuilt and expanded the temple of Aššur as befitting His triumph over the Babylonian deity, Marduk.[30] Within this important city exists a network of cultic architecture, symbols, and images. The text is composed as a detailed record of the various deities, shrines, and holy palaces within the city, and its composition is the duty of Kiṣir-Aššur, who is self-described as an "exorcist of the House of Aššur," following in the footsteps of his father.[31]

[28] Oracc: ATAE: Archival Texts of the Assyrian Empire. "Neo-Assyrian Archival Texts from Assur." Directed by Poppy Tushingham, with the assistance of Nathan Morello and Jamie Novotny. Accessed September 18, 2024. https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/atae/assur/.

[29] Oracc: TCMA: Text Corpus of Middle Assyrian. "Archival Texts of the Middle Assyria Period." Directed by Jacob J. de Ridder. Homepage. Accessed September 18, 2024. https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/tcma/.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Oracc: SAAo: State Archives of Assyria Online. "SAA 20 049. The Gods, Shrines and Holy Palaces of Assur (KAV 042 +)." Directed by Simo Parpola. Accessed September 18, 2024. http://oracc.org/saao/Q004802/.

The exorcist provides a list of numerous deities and their houses, as well as the placement of those deities in specific rooms within holy palace complexes. From the first line, Aššur's preeminence is evident. While there are many holy artifacts in the city of Assur, it is Aššur listed first among the gods and images of the holiest shrine in the empire.[32] Of particular interest in this list is the inclusion of the image of Assyria's king Tiglath-Pileser III within the "holy of holies" in the house of Aššur.[33] The exorcist's record, though lacking an exact date, comes from the extant state archives of the neo-Assyrian period; thus, the only possibility for Tiglath-Pileser is Tiglath-Pileser III, corroborated by legal transactions attributed to the time of his reign from 744-727 BC.[34]

The implications of the exorcist's list are noteworthy; before the conquering of Babylon the first kings of a resurgent Assyria were closely identified with the chief deity of their homeland, so closely in fact that the king's image is in the presence of Aššur in the holiest part of the most important temple in the heart of the empire. It is no great surprise for Aššur's retinue to include other divine beings; a divine council or host is a common feature in ANE religions. How should a mortal be considered who is not only reified but given standing with the divine in the sacred temple? The remaining sections of the exorcist's record provide further instances of such royal inclusion in the "houses" of Anu, Adad, the Assyrian Ištar, and Gula. Beyond the holiest of holies, the exorcist's record continues, listing fourteen houses belonging to distinct deities including Aššur, Samaš, Sĭn, and not one but three Ištars identified with the cities Assyria,

[32] Ibid., line 1.

[33] Ibid., line 12.

[34] Oracc: SAAo: State Archives of Assyria Online. "SAA 06 001. Mušallim-Issar Purchases Slaves (742-XI-26) (ADD 0075)." Directed by Simo Parpola. Accessed September 18, 2024. http://oracc.org/saao/P335027/.

Arbela, and Nineveh respectively.[35] Further, the exorcist identifies houses in the city of Assur by titles such as, "E(šu)buranna, the 'Pantry': the house where meals are prepared."[36] In this pantry the exorcist records several images, including those of Dagan and Enlil. This inclusion is curious. Enlil is attested in earlier periods as a chief deity in Mesopotamia, and there is a possible relationship between Dagan and the harvest of grain.[37] In the Neo-Assyrian period, these two deities are present in the "Pantry" where sacramental meals are prepared, and their function is altered somewhat.

There are myriad observations from the text; foremost perhaps is whether ANE peoples, at least those in the Assyrian empire, formally or informally conceptualized the activity of the divine within a *divine bureaucracy.* Aššur shares his city, his temple, and his holy of holies with images of other gods and human kings. Like earthly kings, deities in the city of Assur can share sovereignty, but they do not and cannot enjoy total sovereignty. Each deity, even the chiefs of the pantheons, can only compose a part of the divine. The Enūma Eliš records how Enlil himself was succeeded by Marduk, who by the time of this ritual was supplanted by Aššur while Assyria dominated the region.[38] These changes in divine headship map neatly onto changes of hegemony in the ANE between Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria. If the status of divine beings merely changes, and they are assigned new duties rather than annihilated in some sort of sympathetic divine combat reflecting conditions on earth, could it be that divinity in the ANE is best understood as a

[35] Ibid., lines 1-7.

[36] Ibid., line 11.

[37] Itamar Singer, "Towards the Image of Dagon the god of the Philistines," *Syria* 69, no. 3/4 (1992): 431-50, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4198967.

[38] Dina Katz, "Reconstructing Babylon: Recycling Mythological Traditions Toward a New Theology," in *Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident,* ed. Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, Margarete van Ess, and Joachim Marzahn (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 126, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110222128.123.

constellation of duties and privileges carried out with degrees of potency by any number of beings?

Evaluations from the Old Testament

The tent of meeting and the Tabernacle, the Philistine Temple of Dagon, and the Solomonic temple of Jerusalem provide three opportunities to trace the Ark of the Covenant through various stages in the development of Yahweh's worship and the history of the people of Israel.[39] The Ark is the quintessential material artifact of Yahweh in the Old Testament, and these three stages reveal the solitary divinity of Yahweh from the Ark's early mobilization in migration and warfare, and ultimately the permanent dwelling of the Ark in the temple of Jerusalem. The Ark is not to be conflated with a divine image as May has done.[40] It is the paramount physical object associated with the life and worship of the Hebrew people, and conceptually it is appropriate to compare its use within the material religious culture of the ANE. Importantly, Yahweh did not require these sanctuaries and objects to have an encounter with His people. To understand the proper function of the Ark as a divine object, it is vital to first weigh the historical period predating its use in which Yahweh was quite active without it. Important observations can be made pertaining to Yahweh's divinity prior to His association with divine objects.

[39] Itamar Singer, "Towards the Image of Dagon, the god of the Philistines," *Syria* 69, no. 3/4 (1992): 431-50, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4198967. Dagon and Dagan are plausible name variations of the same deity; for further study, "Toward the Image of Dagon" addresses this possibility. Establishing the link between Dagan in the Assur ritual and the Dagon of Philistia would be an interesting inquiry; how did Dagan end up in the Pantry?

[40] Natalie N. May, "Portable Sanctuaries and Their Evolution: The Biblical Tabernacle (ʿōhel môʿēd/miškān) and the Akkadian qersu," in *Marbeh Ḥokmah: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Loving Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz,* ed. Shamir Yonah, Edward L. Greenstein, Mayer I. Gruber, Peter Machinist, and Shalom M. Paul (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 382. Recall May's assertion that "the Ark, which was the receptacle for the divine presence, was used in military campaigns, just as the divine symbols were in Mesopotamia." Divine objects, as a category, include material culture, such as images and symbols associated with deities, but the divine presence is imbued in images which bear the likeness of a deity, which the Ark certainly does not. Further, nowhere is the Ark considered to hold or contain the presence of Yahweh; it is a divine object, not a divine image.

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."

Long before the Ark of Yahweh was made, Yahweh met with His people. In the Garden He met with Adam and Eve. He called to Abram in Haran and appeared to him on the first of several occasions at the oak of Moreh (Gen. 12:6-7, ESV).[41] Isaac encountered Him at Gerar and Beersheba, Jacob at Bethel, and Moses in the burning bush on Mount Horeb. These men met with the same God, who identifies Himself to Moses as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" before telling Moses His name, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14-15). God uses the names of people He has met as the reference point for Moses to know to whom He is speaking. Before the Law, the Tabernacle, and the Ark, Yahweh was known and present.

The plagues visited on Egypt served to drive the Israelites out of slavery and into the land of promise, away from the forced denial of Yahweh and into the freedom to worship Him. Rather than Israel's fortunes being bound to the chief deity of their enslavers, or even the god of a liberator nation conquering the Egyptians, they are once again linked with Yahweh in His action of rescue unto the end He promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yahweh's plagues are directed at the core of religious activity in ancient Egypt. Human-animal hybrid deities, such as Isis of the Nile and Ra of the sun, have supposed dominion over natural phenomenon, but Yahweh destroys this notion by exercising actual dominion over the purview of Isis, Ra, and indeed the whole pantheon of Egypt. Exodus 9:14 details a revelation from Yahweh to the captive Hebrews and their Egyptian masters ahead of the seventh plague: "There is none like Me in all the earth." With each plague He further displays this singular authority and potency. The continuity of Yahweh is remarkable, and when He brings His people out of Egypt, it is for the same unified purpose, to

[41] Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical passages referenced employ the *English Standard Version*.

build a people for himself who will acknowledge His great and holy name in all the earth. Nothing changes in Yahweh's motives; His purpose is singular and perpetual from the Garden to the New Jerusalem.

The introduction of the Ark is a watershed moment in Hebrew worship because Yahweh chooses to make a place for Himself amongst His people according to detailed instructions and continued observance of all He commands. Earlier, Yahweh met only with those few individuals whom He called to himself; now the covenant continuity applies to the entirety of Israel through a mediator who meets directly with God. Yahweh prearranges these meetings with Moses in a unique way, differing greatly from prior encounters. Yahweh Himself first establishes a temporary meeting place, then a more permanent setting for these meetings. The first of these set meetings takes place on the mountain of God, Mount Horeb. Once the law is given and instructions for the Tabernacle and the Ark are put into action, Exodus 33:7-11 records Moses's meeting with God "face to face" in the "tent of meeting," while the construction of Yahweh's Tabernacle and Ark takes place. Once the Tabernacle is built and the Ark is finished, the meeting place is no longer outside the camp, but at the very center of the life and worship of Israel.

The Ark cannot be understood as the divine image of Yahweh who expressly prohibits man-made images of worship, including representations of himself in Exodus 20:4-5. It is not the receptacle of the divine presence of Yahweh. It is the throne where Yahweh comes down to lead and to judge His people, governing the affairs of their lives. Yahweh describes it as the meeting place between Himself and His people; a continuation of the relationship He had with the patriarchs of the Hebrews. If the Tabernacle is where Yahweh comes to dwell with His nomadic people, the Ark is the throne where He sits in authority over them. Yahweh does not delegate martial, judicial, religious, or governmental affairs to other divine beings, nor does He make His

images (mankind) divine. There is no method for the binding of Yahweh to His Ark and no way for His priests to coerce action from Him. They cannot draw Him any closer or remove Him from their midst with ritual objects like *tarpala, ulihi* or other equivalent means.

Yahweh has complete prerogative in His dealings with Israel and the Ark, the object most closely associated with Him in the Old Testament. It is where Yahweh promises to meet with His people without reducing His numinous quality to one location; it is simply the one place where His people can anticipate His presence. It is in the presence of this God and His people that Moses gives the Shema, declaring the oneness of God and requiring complete exclusivity of all the heart, soul, and might of the people. This is no exaggeration meant to suggest Israel must love Yahweh the most; it is testament to an utterly different conception of divinity within the ANE, one that is total, singular, and therefore indivisible.

"Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before."

Unauthorized use of force in ancient Israel was always accompanied by disastrous results. Numbers 14:40-45 recounts Israel's rebellion against God and refusal to enter Canaan; they ignored the admonishment of God and sought to take Canaan by their own hand. They went up to fight without the Ark and without a leader. Without the authorization and power of Yahweh, they were crushed by Canaanites, their reactionary fervor amounting only to death and ruin. In the Ark narrative found in the first book of Samuel, the Israelites do not fail to bring the Ark to the battle from its place in Shiloh, though as before in the failed foray into Canaan, their leadership is dubious. Hophni and Phineas, like Nadab and Abihu, do not consult with the Lord before acting on behalf of Israel and utilizing the consecrated material objects of Yahweh in a manner of their own device (Lev. 10:1). These four men, all sons of a high priest, pay for their

wickedness with their lives, and in the case of Hophni and Phineas, Israel is led astray by these wayward sons into a fatal conflict with Philistia.

Assumptions, speculation, and superstitions are at play in the background of the Ark narrative. The Israelites and Philistines both seem to mistake the purpose of the Ark, and more precisely, they err in understanding the character of the God associated with the Ark. From the Israelite perspective, this is the Ark which led the people around the walls of Jericho, toppling the city's defenses and punctuating their dramatic entrance into the promised land. Before this victory, the same Ark dried up a path through the Jordan river for the hosts of Israel to cross into Canaan. Surely the Israelites were in awe of the Ark, but could it be that they ascribed power to the object itself as though it were a talisman, trusting in its martial use and its influence over the natural world? Likewise, the Philistines consider the Ark to represent a powerful god or even multiple gods who afflicted the Egyptians with plagues (1 Sam. 4:8). The Philistines recognize divine power; they even acknowledge that the god(s) of the Ark in the camp of Israel may be more powerful than their own gods, and steel themselves to fight as though their own gods would not deliver them (1 Sam. 4:7). Ultimately Philistia prevails over Israel and a curious thing happens. They take possession of the very Ark which filled them with so much dread.

When the Ark is captured, Israel drinks deeply of despair. The people lament, Eli the priest dies not long after his wicked sons, and Eli's infant grandchild, Ichabod, is named for the supposed departure of God's glory from Israel because the Ark was captured (1 Sam. 4:11-22). Israel's lamentation would be appropriate if the Ark were indeed the receptacle of Yahweh's divine presence, as May contends. However, what takes place next in the narrative shatters the assumption that Yahweh is bound to His Ark. In what follows the glory of Yahweh remains intact behind enemy lines, and the power of Yahweh is shown to be without border. The Philistines set

the Ark in the temple of their deity, Dagon. It matters little whether this is meant to curry favor with Yahweh by adding him to the ranks of their gods or to make Yahweh subordinate to Dagon. Whatever the reason, the result is incredible. In a temple dedicated to another god, the earthly throne of Yahweh is placed, and He asserts His preeminence over the sanctuary. The hands of Dagon are cut off, the head of Dagon is severed, and everywhere the Ark is sent, it brings calamity to the Philistines (1 Sam. 5:1-6). The kings and leaders of Philistia, like the elders of Israel, consult with one another as to what should be done with the Ark, and Yahweh is not pleased with their speculative attempts to assuage Him.

The Ark is not the locus of Yahweh's power in Israel within or outside the bounds of their camp. Even in the temple of another god, the throne of Yahweh is the seat of all power on the earth. The king of this throne sits upon it at His own pleasure without influence from worshippers or ritual specialists regardless of their religion or supposed fealty. Yahweh is acutely active around the immediate area of the Ark for the duration of its travels. Truly, the Glory of the Lord does not depart from Israel because of impotence. It extends further than the remembrance of the Israelites who had seen Yahweh victorious so many times before. In this narrative there is an important reminder: Yahweh is self-existent, He does not begin and end with His people, and He does not require mankind to act on His behalf. He needs no army to vanquish Egypt or subdue the cities of the Philistines. The Ark, like the whole of the earth, and indeed all things, belongs to Yahweh, and He does what He pleases.

"And this house will become a heap of ruins"

Second Samuel 6:12-15 describes the entrance of Yahweh's Ark into Jerusalem and the ensuing celebration led by King David. The Ark had dwelled in Kiriath-jearim since its return from Philistia but had not been housed or treated in the manner which Yahweh prescribed during

that time (1 Sam. 7:1-2). The Ark, apparently forgotten, had to be sought in the house of Abinadab before it could be brought to Jerusalem, and until the time of Solomon, the Ark would not be at rest in Israel. Four hundred and eighty years after bringing His people out of the land of Egypt, Yahweh gives rest to His people on every side and allows Solomon to build Him a house in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6:1). The splendor of the first Temple of God is detailed in the books of the kings, and those exiles who witness the dedication of the second temple weep because it cannot compare to the first. Throughout the years between the Exodus and the construction of the temple, there had been other altars and memorials in Israel dedicated to Yahweh, but there was only one Tabernacle and only one Ark. Wherever these divine objects were, the people of God gathered to worship one God, Yahweh, in the manner He prescribed.

It is only fitting for such a God to have one holy city, Jerusalem. Unlike the city of Assur, Jerusalem does not begin as a religious center for a plurality of divine beings and their associated objects and shrines. Jerusalem is consecrated for Yahweh only, and so it has but one temple. In size and magnificence, the temple is scaled up from the Tabernacle, and 1 Kings 8:10-11 attests how the glory of the Lord fills the temple, as it had when the Tabernacle had been consecrated. Yahweh appears to Solomon in His temple making it clear that He Himself, not the priests nor Solomon, has consecrated the temple, "by putting My name there forever" (1 Kings 9:3). The house is for His name alone, and Yahweh warns Solomon of what will happen to Israel, the line of David, and the very house in which Yahweh is pleased to dwell, if Solomon or His children turn from following Yahweh and serve other gods; then the house of Yahweh's name will become a house of ruins (1 Kings 9:8).

Jerusalem, the City of David where the temple of God was erected, did not endure as a holy city. Even in the time of Solomon, Jerusalem hosted the detestable practices of other nations

serving other gods. Throughout the monarchic period of Israel and Judah, the kings who lived in Jerusalem vacillated between walking in wickedness or righteousness during their reigns. The Ark, which had once toppled the image of Dagon in his temple, shared its house with abominations from Canaan. Therefore, Yahweh abandoned His house, since it was profaned by His people. Like Assur, Jerusalem became a city for many gods and their manifold cults. The temple, Jerusalem, and the nation of Israel were not irrefragable like the God who chose to be present among them, and soon they descended into division and plurality of worship.

The Ark is not mentioned again until the book of Revelation, when it is briefly seen in John's vision of God's temple in heaven (Rev. 11:19). It is not, however, mentioned in the vision of the new heavens and the new earth, for there is no temple there and thus, no place for the Ark: "For its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22). When the Lord God has peace on all sides, so will mankind. The Tabernacle, the Temple, and the Ark of God were all temporary visual symbols pointing to the invisible reality of an indivisible God. Nothing is diminished by the lack of divine objects, on earth and in heaven. Their absence speaks to the wholeness of God's divinity, supplying all that is necessary for existence from His being.

Conclusions

In summary, divinity was the essential subject of this research. The possibility of divisible divinity introduced in Beckman's translation of the Pirinkir ritual served as the catalyst for this research. If divinity is divisible in some way, as suggested in the ritual, questions seeking to explore those possible dividing lines inevitably arise. Throughout this project the author revisited the question: What is implied or asserted about divinity in this text?

This paper asked whether gods of the ANE interact with their people in the fullness of their divinity or if they divide themselves between different locations in fixed and mobile

sanctuaries. In the case of Pirinkir and other deities in the ANE, omnipresence does not appear to be a feature of divinity; thus, these gods cannot fully interact with the metaphysical and physical world in the full scope of their divinity. There seem to be limits.

The second question is more easily addressed. Many gods of the ANE, except Yahweh, had multiple images, shrines, and sanctuaries where the material reality of their divine presence was assumed. This does not exclude the possibility of other cults worshipping a singular deity with one temple at the exclusion of all other deities and temples, but even if such a cult were discovered, it would not be normative. In support of the second half of the hypothesis for this paper, the research has shown that divinity amongst the non-Hebrew ANE cultures is not a static target, and there are several ways in which divinity can be observably divided.

This paper also considered the activity of Yahweh along the same possible line of divisible divinity. Yahweh led Israel throughout their migrations and their conquest of Canaan. He does so in the fullness of His divinity. Affirming the first part of this paper's hypothesis, records of the Ark and Tabernacle in the Old Testament do not include a possible division of Yahweh's divinity. This is largely due to the delineation between divine images and objects. Unlike the gods of the ANE, Yahweh has no images except mankind, which suggests His potency, influence, and presence are complete, covering the entire earth even as He maintains order and divine rule over all things. His images are everywhere reflecting the reality that He is everywhere. The continuity of Yahweh's oneness is unbroken before, during, and after the Ark is present in Israel. The Ark serves a different purpose than that of the images and shrines present in other cultures. It is a temporary throne reflecting an eternally existent, invisible reality. It is a divine object, but the function of the Ark is as different as the God with whom it is associated.

Further Research

None of the extrabiblical texts included in this research contain explicit mention of divine activity or response on the part of those deities associated with divine objects. In fairness, the included biblical texts contain both inactivity and activity on the part of Yahweh pertaining to Hebrew usage of divine objects. An obvious extension of this research would be to identify and compile extrabiblical texts in which the activity of ANE deities is described in direct relationship to their associated divine objects. Pirinkir, for example, is described as the "Goddess of the Night," but a source describing a ritual in which Pirinkir's image somehow influences the night would further the understanding of how the Hittite culture understood the purpose of Pirinkir's image.

One surprising finding stemming from the broader research for this paper is the relationship between divinity and royalty in the Ancient Near East. Darius and Sennacherib had their satraps and governors; the gods likewise had their own vassals. It would be a worthwhile endeavor to study the relationship between ANE conceptions of royalty and divinity, and how their development influenced the other. The numerous inclusions of royal images in the shrines of divine beings suggest more than a patron-client relationship between gods and kings. There are, of course, other avenues for further research, and hopefully some suggestions will be offered and pursued by readers of this project.

Appendix A

Text of the Priest of the Deity of the Night

Excerpts from Text 6 in "Temple Building among the Hittites"

"§9 The next day, the second day, while the sun is still up, they take these things from the house of that ritual patron: one *tarpala* of red wool, one *tarpala* of blue wool, one woolen *kišri*, one shekel of silver, one *gazzarnul*-cloth, a little fine oil, three unleavened breads, and one jug of wine. And they go to the waters of purification to draw (some), and they draw water of purification. Then they carry it to the temple of the Deity of the Night from which the (new) temple of the Deity of the Night is built. They place it on the roof, and it spends the night beneath the stars. On the day that they take the water of purification, they draw the old deity from the mountain, the river, the pasture, the sky, and the earth along the seven roads and the seven paths by means of the red wool and the fine oil." [42]

"§10 They draw her to the old temple and bind an *uliḫi* on the deity. The personnel of the deity take these things: one *tarpala* of red wool, one *tarpala* of blue wool, one woolen *kišri*, one white *kureššar*-garment, one bead of *kirinni*-stone, one shekel of silver, a little fine oil, five unleavened breads, two *mūlati*-loaves of one-half handful (of flour), one small cheese, and one jug of wine—they take these things for the Ritual of Drawing Up. One *tarpala* of red wool, one *tarpala* of blue wool, one loop of white wool, two *mūlati*-loaves of one-half handful, five unleavened breads, (and) a little fine oil—they take these things for the *duḫapši*-Ritual."

[42] Gary Beckman, "Temple Building among the Hittites," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 80-85.

"§21 But when they finish the *tuḫalzi*-Ritual in the old temple, they pour the fine oil into a wooden *tallai*-vessel, and (s)he says before the deity, 'O esteemed deity, guard your person, but divide your divinity! Come (along) to that new temple and take possession of the honored place! When you go, take possession of that very place!' Then they draw the deity seven times from the wall with red wool. And (s)he places the *uliḫi* into the *tallai*-vessel of fine oil."

"§30 As for the *ulihi* brought from the old temple, they open that *tallai*-vessel. Then they mix that old fine oil of the *tallai*-vessel [with] the water with which they will wash the wall of the temple. Then they wash the wall with that so that the temple is purified. But the ritual patron does [not] come."

"§31 Then they bind the old *ulihi* onto the red kureššar-garment of the new deity."

Appendix B

The Gods, Shrines and Holy Palaces of Assur

Excerpts from ORACC SAA 20 049[43]

1-14 "Aššur, Lord Tiara, Aššur of Reading; Šerua, Kippatmati, the Window ofTašmetu; Sîn, Šamaš; Šulpaamaša, Šulpaguna; three gods of the room; the Conquerors, the Weapon, the Axe, Kunuš-kadru; image of Tiglath-Pileser: total (of gods) in the holy of holies."

22-25 "Enlil, Dagan, Bel-labria, the Judges of the dais, Mišaru, Belet-ili, another Belet-ili, Šakkan: total (of gods) in the 'Pantry.'"

54-58 "Anu, Antu, the Fates, the Kulittus, the Kubus, Ningirsu, the Great Gods, Ebeh, a Royal Image: total 9 gods in the houses of Anu."

59-62 "Adad, Šala, Nisaba, Habiru, Kubu, two royal images, Šeriš, Harmiš, Ningirsu: total 10 gods in the house of Adad."

74–81 "The Assyrian Ištar, Ber, Tašmetu, Kutatati, the Fates, Papsukkal, Tammuz, Aruru, Šarrat-eqi, Latarak, Kulili, (Ulaya), a royal image, four lions, Mulahhišu."

[43] Oracc: SAAo: State Archives of Assyria Online. "SAA 20 049. The Gods, Shrines and Holy Palaces of Assur (KAV 042 +)." Directed by Simo Parpola. Accessed September 18, 2024. http://oracc.org/saao/Q004802/.

Appendix C

Excerpts from Natalie May's "Portable Sanctuaries and Their Evolution: The Biblical Tabernacle (*ʿōhel môʿēd/miškān*) and the Akkadian *qersu*"

"The Ark, which was the receptacle for the divine presence, was used in military campaigns, just as the divine symbols were in Mesopotamia. It preceded the tribes of Israel at their entrance into Canaan, showing them the way and drying up the waters of the Jordan (Josh 3:3– 17; 4:18). It accompanied the procession around the walls of the besieged Jericho (Josh 6:5– 8, 10– 12). Finally, Israelites brought along the Ark to support their army in the second battle against the Philistines at Ebenezer (1 Sam 4:3– 6), where it was captured by the latter (fig. 7; 1 Sam 4:11). This event was perceived as the abandonment of Israel by Yhwh (1 Sam 4:21)."[44]

"I suggest the following scheme for the evolution of the *qersu*. In Mari, it was introduced as the wooden frames (*qersū*) of the West Semitic nomadic portable sanctuary, analogous to the biblical Priestly Tabernacle (*ʾōhel m*ôʿēd) and its *qĕrāšîm*. Gradually, due to its being a distinctive feature of a tent sanctuary, the term *qersū* came to be employed *pars pro toto* meaning the entire portable shrine, not just its frame. The donkey sacrifice, which is a typically nomadic

[44] Natalie N. May, "Portable Sanctuaries and Their Evolution: The Biblical Tabernacle (ʿōhel môʿēd/miškān) and the Akkadian qersu," in *Marbeh Ḥokmah: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Loving Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz,* ed. Shamir Yonah, Edward L. Greenstein, Mayer I. Gruber, Peter Machinist, and Shalom M. Paul (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 382.

Amorite rite, takes place in the *qersū* according to the *kispum* ritual (M. 12803, lines 10– 12), thus proving the West Semitic character of the whole ritual and its attributes beyond Hebrew and Ugaritic cognates. *Qersū/qersu* was introduced into Akkadian with the meaning 'tent sanctuary' or 'portable sanctuary,' which it later had in the Neo-Assyrian texts. The text of the funeral offerings ritual (M. 12803), where *qersū* is first attested with this meaning, is attributed to Samsī-Addu I, the Assyrian ruler of Mari. Thus, perhaps the term *qersū* as a 'portable shrine' was colloquial in Assyrian Amorite, and the portable sanctuary itself together with the word designating it survived in Assyria as a heritage of the Amorite nomadic milieu."[45]

[45] Ibid., 387.

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